

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ROHINTONMISTRY'S FICTION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *FAMILY MATTERS*

RESHU SINGH

Research Scholar, Department of English, Gurukul Kangri University, Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

The present work, 'Socio-political Consciousness in RohintonMistry's Fiction with Special Reference to Family Matters as the title itself unfolds, emphasizes on the consciousness of social, political, economic, moral, cultural and intellectual background.

In fact, his novel Family Matters is a social document pregnant with political and historical flavour. The project unfolds how Mistry has delineated these features by using various devices. The novel is a literary presentation of facts, both historical and contemporary. Mistry's language is a fine specimen of Indo-Canadian English. He uses highly polished and refined language, sometimes tinged with emotions, when he describes the dignity of his characters and when he champions the cause of the dignity of under-fog. In the novel Mistry's engagement is with the Parsi community, to which he belongs. He remains a constant one, even as he goes on to expand his concerns to the wider issues of politics and society in India, and foregrounds the lives of the poor and disadvantaged with sympathy and understanding. This novel treats directly Parsi anxiety concerning immigration, cross-cultural marriages, and declining birth rates.

As a whole it is Mistry's unmistakable yearning to go back to his roots nostalgically that finds its multiple expressions in his fiction. In his writings, he desires to go back to his roots and during the course of narration; Mistry also images India in its multifaceted complexities and realities. He perceives India minutely with a critical view point in his work.

Mistry depicts the contemporary politics through the mirror of society in his novels. With the help of his characters Mistry brings out stark and real contemporary politics in the front of the reader. He has brought out some real but one sided and limited version of politics of almost every level which was present in India. His novel has vivid portrayal of contemporary politics and political consciousness of the society.

KEYWORDS: Socio-political Consciousness, *Family Matters*, RohintonMistry, cultural and social life, Parsi religion, Zoroastrian, Politics, Communal riots, Contemporary India, Fundamentalism, Indian secularism, *Shiv Sena*

INTRODUCTION

In *Family Matters*, his engagement with the Parsi community, to which he belongs, remains a constant one, even as he goes on to expand his concerns to the wider issues of politics and society in India, and foregrounds the lives of the poor and disadvantaged with sympathy and understanding. It manages to be warm and familiar, while -- for North American readers, at any rate - fragrantly exotic. As in all of Mistry's previous novels, nothing comes easily to his characters and while the resultant tragedy can be difficult to fathom from a Western perspective, Mistry's work remains a compelling examination of a culture that on the surface seems foreign, but at heart remains universal.

This novel treats directly Parsi anxiety concerning immigration, cross-cultural marriages, and declining birth rates (at times sighting statics), and seems ultimately to connect these anxiety to a failure of the imagination: that is, the failure to imagine a new kind of Parsi community, one better integrated in the Indian life and not so absorbed in issues of cultural purity. The story revolves around a flat inhabited by a 79-year old; Parkinson's-stricken Nariman Vakeel an ailing retired Parsi English professor. *Family Matters* explores the nature of Nariman's relationships with his extended family: his two stepsons, who reproach him for his betrayal of their mother, his son-in-law, who is undergoing a personal crisis and falls into Parsi fundamentalism, and the grandchildren he attempts to reacquaint himself with.

The novel is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up, and tells the story of a middle-class Parsi family living through a domestic crisis. Most of the events take place in two apartments. What perspectives do the names of these buildings- Chateau Felicity and Pleasant Villas- cast on the lives lived within them. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among India's Parsis, Persian-descended, Zoroastrians, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism.

In abstract terms, society refers to a web of social relationships. A group of people, who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area and feel themselves a unified and distinct entity constitute a society. In cultural and social life, the event or social event refers to a social gathering or activity, such as musical festival, marriage ceremony, sports competition, birthday party, and meetings. A creative artist in order to depict his social consciousness chooses a society and its persons or representatives in his work. Likewise, Rohinton Mistry, in *Family Matters*, delineates his social consciousness by employing a wide range of characters of Indian society. Economic conditions also constitute the fabric of Mistry's works.

Rohinton Mistry is very well aware of the fact that the sub-system of society and therefore, economic activities of the individuals of the society are governed by rules and procedures down by the society itself. "Economic conditions of the inhabitants of the society have great impact on their social behavior and thus provide a kind of marker in the course of their lives"(Aziz 184). Set in Bombay in the mid -1990s, *Family Matters* (2002) tells a story of familial love and obligation, of personal and political corruption, of the demand of tradition and the possibilities of compassion. In cultural and social life, the event or social event refers to a social gathering or activity, such as musical festival, marriage ceremony, sports competition, birthday party and meetings.

Nariman Vakeel, the widowed patriarch of an extended family lives with his stepdaughter Coomy and stepson Jal in a large flat in politically corrupted city Bombay. His gradually debilitating Parkinson's disease and a broken ankle cause him to need Coomy and Jal's help for nearly everything. Nariman Vakeel is celebrating his seventy-nine birthday. Yazad and Roxana bought a walking stick as a gift on the seventy-nine birthday of Nariman. Coomy says that the walking stick is a sign of how inconsiderable you are. "Never were you like this, not till you got married and left. Now you have no concern for how we live or die. And that hurts me!" (Mistry 36). Nariman complains to Coomy, "In my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years, now you want to torment my age. I won't allow it." (Mistry 7) Nariman, in his youth, loved a Christian girl called Lucy. But due to Parsi religion they could not marry. About eleven years Nariman and Lucy had planned to create a world for themselves. Lucy called it Cocoon. A cocoon was what they needed, she said, into which they could retreat, and after their family has forgotten their existence, they would emerge like two glittering butterflies and fly away together." (Mistry 13) At last Nariman refused the idea to get marry with Lucy.

As a whole in the novel both the major and minor characters face the hardship of life due to poverty. It is painful to know that there are envelopes but they do not have money. "Envelops are no use without money to put in them" (Mistry 23). Coomy's response to cook food, on Nariman's seventy-ninth birthday, unfolds this embittered situation, when she says "what with the storage, and the prices in the market, and the good quality stuff being exported, it was so difficult to cook a decent dinner" (Mistry 36). The quarrels between parents over the money matters ask frequent in the novel and this features stamps the incompatible financial needs. Jehangir's mother and father quarrel as usual, because they do not have enough to pay for everything. The house of Roxana is a suitable example to unravel the misery of a family due to financial hardship. She has to manage even the food within limits due to Yezad insufficient. She buys "bread but not butter, and a small tin of cooking oil instead of the more economical large one. Tea, sugar, rice, could wait till next week. And dinner would be meatless, just cauliflower with potatoes" (Mistry 187). At least once a day Roxana has to with her budget envelops to make the balance between money and need. Roxana takes smaller food to leave something in the pot. How painful it is to know that the little boys pretending to be unknown about this condition, refuse to eat much. "Murad has hesitated, though Jahangir had quickly refused forcing her to take her share" (Mistry 196). The children helplessly respond to life as it comes to them. Murad walks home to save his bus fare. Indeed, this family has its share of filial ingratitude and betrayal. Nariman defines the situation to Jehangir. "Liking has nothing to do with it. People have their own lives; it's not helpful when something disturbs those lives" (Mistry 149).

Despite the initial resistance and non-cooperation of her husband, the daughter manages to take good care of her father trying to keep him as clean as possible. As Providence would have it, the son-in-law is in constant monetary pressure and as medical expenses on the old man mount, the family has to cut down on their routine meals. Mistry, himself commenting on Yazad's situation thus-

Gaining the corner, Yezad could observe his sons on the balcony without being seen himself. Their anxious faces distressed him. How much pleasure he used to get from seeing their healthy appetites. The last few weeks had erased all that ... and Roxie taking smaller helpings every day, to leave something in the pot, but the boys weren't fooled by it ... The first time, Murad had hesitated, though Jehangla had quickly refused, signalling to his brother. Murad must have been really hungry tonight, to have asked for more bread...(Mistry 198)

The thought bore through Yezad's mind like an auger. Consumed with financial worries, Yezad becomes involved in an ill-fated plan to deceive his employer while Coomy plots to keep her father in Roxanna's home and out of her own. Thus, Mistry proficiently has woven his various characters into family-matters and into social-life and has given accounts of common Indian families in his novel.

Mistry understands the texture of life for someone of Parsi descent living in India. A born story teller, in his tales Mistry depicts middle class life among the Parsi community, as he recalls it from abroad. In his intersecting novel is set in an apartment block in Bombay where a number of Parsi families live, all the people who live there are the protagonists. Mistry can describe daily life among the Parsi of Bombay touching, at the same time, meaningful work themes and significant issues of contemporary multicultural and migrant realities.

It is noteworthy point that Mistry also encounters the age old culture and civilization of India sub-continent and views profoundly the dramatic change occurring in the social, political and cultural atmosphere of India.

Mistry manages to all the ambiguities of family life very subtly by offering a picture of Indian lower middle class.

Rohinton Mistry in his fiction shows the economic hardships of the middle-class families of India. He portrays the problematic life of the middle-class families and their impact on the life of the inhabitants through economic hardships of the society. Closely knit as a community, Parsis are often treated as a little-understood and foreign presence by the Hindu-dominated nation of India.

In *Family Matters*, Mistry focuses more narrowly on the city's middle-class, and at its best when showing the stress, the stink, and the unexpected blessings experienced by Nariman's daughter, Roxana and her family as they look after him in their crowded two room apartment. Nariman, the protagonist, is a Parsi, a tiny Indian minority that follows the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrian. Nariman Vakeel whose deteriorating health creates strain in the lives of his adult step children Coomy and Jal, his daughter, Roxana Chenoy, her husband, Yezad, and their sons.

As a whole it is Mistry's unmistakable yearning to go back to his roots nostalgically that finds its multiple expressions in his fiction. In his writings, he desires to go back to his roots and during the course of narration; Mistry also images India in its multifaceted complexities and realities. He perceives India minutely with a critical view point in his work.

Politics which is defined as the art and science of government has always played an important role in shaping contemporary societies and scenario of contemporary society has found place in the works of Rohinton Mistry. Rohinton Mistry latest novel *Family Matters* is also a brilliant expression of corruption and economic hardships upon which the Indian politics flourishes. Besides family values Mistry also gives a reference about the corruption in government sector.

Mistry depicts the contemporary politics through the mirror of society in his novels. With the help of his characters Mistry brings out stark and real contemporary politics in the front of the reader. He has brought out some real but one sided and limited version of politics of almost every level which was present in India. His novel has vivid portrayal of contemporary politics and political consciousness of the society.

Mumbai as the place where he was born is not only a city that he knows intimately; Mumbai is also the city of politics. In his novel, Mistry paints the picture of regional politics within India in general and within Mumbai in particular. Mistry in *Family Matters* weaves character, motifs real history and fiction into a rich tapestry. He comes into contact with political corruption, he gets involved in communal riots, finally ends by appearing like an almost *Kafkaian* creature. As an artist, he objectively delineates the reality of life prevalent in our society. His novels candidly offer a bold view of life in which they are suffused with an objective analysis of various political aspects and problems. He provides deeply felt reflections to their relationships between individual and his surroundings and the complex problems arising out of them. In a vision which does not leave many hopes for future, Mistry sees the India of 1971 as a country where public latrines can become temples while temple can turn into dust and ruins. Contemporary India with its unrelenting liturgy of rail accidents, custodial death, poverty driven suicide, instances of astronomical medical bugling and government short sightedness, has become in red to suffering.

In this novel, we can observe that how political parties affecting daily routine life of a common man by its publicity and for name-fame. It is more of a fictional reflection about caste and privilege, in the light of the consequences of Indira Gandhi's political decisions on the unprivileged. Mistry is the one who is hypercritical about even the frivolous political occurrence that may seem to affect the life of Parsis in India. In *Family Matters* has the backdrop of the

demolition of *Babri Masjid* in 1992. The plots of the novel centre round the three major political events incorporating within themselves all other hazardous political activities which act according to Mistry jeopardize the Parsi life. Mistry's main concern is to show that communal frenzy which started during the freedom struggle still continues to dog India in different forms such as the oft referred to cross border terrorism.

Mistry seems to be solving the problem of Diaspora by implicating that it is only by adopting a coalition style politics with other communities can successful nations be made. Not only do people share homes in Bombay, but in places like Mr. Kapur's shop they are also celebrating all festivals, as a means of acknowledging unity in diversity. "Diwali, Christmas, Id, your Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi everything" (Mistry 210). What is striking is the manner in which the people of different cultures mingle, preserve and enhance their culture by a selective engagement with other cultures. Moreover there is an argument put forth by Kapur which would be Mistry's message to the so called displaced, alienated, marginalized people. All this is a feeling which is there in the mind. ; Once the mindset is changed and we choose to establish a sense of belongingness and commitment, a cultural acceptance or cultural unity can be arrived at. The following passage by Kapur elucidates this powerful opinion. Kapur claimed his love for Bombay was special, far exceeding what a born-and-bred Bombayite could feel. Mr. Kapur said,

It's the difference between being born into a religion and converting to it. The convert takes nothing for granted. He chooses, thus his commitment is superior. What I feel for Bombay you will never know. It's like the pure love for a beautiful woman, gratitude for her existence, and devotion for her living presence. If Bombay were a creature of flesh and blood, with my blood type, Rh negative-and very often I think her is-then I would give her a transfusion down to my last drop, to save her life. (Mistry 152)

It is not only a sense of belongingness that resuscitates and rejuvenates the so called alienated, deprived, marginalized people. One more condition is essential and that is a strong sense of TRUST. The need for trust is explained in the following passage which is a mundane sight in the daily grind of a city like Bombay:-

A train was leaving, completely packed, and the men running alongside gave up. All except one. I kept my eyes on him because the platform was coming to an end. Suddenly he raised his arms. And people on the train reached out and grabbed them. What were they doing, he would be dragged and killed, I thought! A moment later, they had lifted him off the platform. Now his feet were dangling outside the compartment, and I almost screamed to stop the train. His feet pedalled the air. There he was, hanging his life literally in the hands of strangers. And he had put it there. He had trusted them. More arms reached out and held him tight in their embrace. It was a miracle-suddenly he was completely safe. So safe, I wondered if I had over reacted to the earlier danger. But no, his position had been truly perilous for a few seconds. (Mistry 160).

As suffering from paranoia, Mistry creates the illusion that in India the minority communities affected by the growing fundamentalism. The plot is specially devised and manipulated by him to respond to the maximum the fear that their existence threatened. In his novel Mistry makes fun of Indian secularism which can never be at stake as per Indian constitution.

Mistry is bold enough to bring into focus the *Babri Masjid* issues and highlight the large scale violence that ended after its demolition.

Mistry nowhere in his fiction shows the country's vast development during the decades following the

Independence, Indian democracy, Parliamentary system of government. The rights enjoyed by the minorities and *Dalits* and such things have ended his attention. Yezad, Nariman and Jal discuss the chaotic condition of the politics: about poor people in a village in Bihar who'd died of hunger because money for food and irrigation went straight into the pockets of corrupt district officials, about the four hundred and fifty children crushed to death while attending a school function because the contractor who built the hall had cheated on the cement; and about the dozen who were burnt alive in a fire at a cinema without a sprinkler system because the owner had bribed the safety inspector to give him a false certificate.(Mistry 144).

Yezad helplessly admits that the whole system has deteriorated- socially, politically and religiously. Corruption has become omnipresent in the society. Mistry exposes the present condition of India in his novel, where corruption "in the air." Mistry hints at corruption that prevails in every nook and corner of India, through Yezad. He accepts that "corruption in the air we breathe, this nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks. Right chief?"(Mistry31).

Mistry's novel, also gives inner view of the *Shiv Sena* which was an important phenomena in regional politics of that time. Novel also shows that corruption has found roots in virtually every aspects of society. There is also one important factor in the fiction of Mistry that he does not paint a good picture of Indira Gandhi and her family. He describes the one sided reality according to the minority prospective. He criticized the decision of Indira Gandhi for the nationalization of Banks. It was fact that the party community is the one group who got loss after the nationalization of banks. But it was good decision for the peoples, government and the country also.

Mistry in the novel presents the fear caused by the activities of the *Senapati* of the *Shiv Sena*. Yezad unmasks this fear by unfolding *Senapati's* reaction to the minorities, who says "South Indians are anti – Bombay, valentine's Day is anti- Hindustan, film star born before 1947 in the Pakistani part of Punjab are traitors to the country".(Mistry 32)Yezad feels relaxed to think that the *Shiv Sena*, which is a Hindu organisation, has not yet made Santa Claus a political issues. To them, *Shiv Sena* openly advocates racist goals and so reacts irrationally. Husain tells the reaction of *Shiv Sena* against Muslims. He was the witness of *Babri Mosque* riots. He tells Mr. Kapur that *Shiv Sena* "killed so many innocent, with my own eyes I saw it, Sahib, they locked them in their house and set fire to them, and they attacked people with swords and axes."(Mistry 386).

Mistry, commenting on the income of the *Shiv Sena*, says that they collect money from businessman in the name of donation and still call themselves the advocates of Indian culture. He says that *ShivSena* machinery is financed by even *Matka* which gave money for the plastic explosive with which the terrorists blew up the stock exchange. Here he explicitly tells that enemies of the nation, and political parties that claim to be defenders of the nation, all rely on the same sources. Mistry digs at *Shiv Sena* and feels sorry for Mumbai for being raped by politicians. Mistry is not much against them as a political party as their links with *mutka*, a sort of gambling. He calls *Shiv Sena* "greatest urban menace."(Mistry 209)*Shiv Sena* involved themselves in looting, burning.

Thus he is alive in a particular place and period of time and a part of a particular social, political, economic, moral, cultural and intellectual background. He also finds around him a huge web of relationships, personals and impersonals and his development as an entity is the result of these conscious and unconscious reactions to these relationships. He observes them closely, assimilates them into his own experiences and transmits them into the form of creative works with a distinctive touch of his own; His fiction provides illumination insight into the complex relations between society, the artist and his creation. His novels candidly offer a bold view of life in that they are suffused with and

objective analysis of various social aspects and problems. Mistry has successfully embedded the political crisis of his time in the literary endeavours depicts the fact that they seem one sided version of historical events. He depicts the contemporary politics by encountering its stark features. His fiction characterizes Bombay in particular and India in general in terms of political scenario. He gives voice to the feeling and emotions, fears and doubts, hopes and aspirations of the people. No doubt, he exceptionally individualistic, it is not possible to exclude altogether from his works the influence of the social environment in which he has grown because his own personality has been modeled not in vacuum but by the main currents of life around him.

Rohinton Mistry has provided some of the most sustained explorations of post-Independence Indian society through his chronicles of individual and community lives. Mistry's novel, *Family Matters* covers many themes, from politics to Parsi community life and economic inequality to national 'events' such as wars, rigorously examining the impact of historical forces and social events on 'small' lives.

This novel concerns people who try to find self –worthwhile dealing with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political constraints. The manner in which the characters and events are skillfully linked together to run into a stream of stories brings Mistry very close to Chaucer.

Mistry depicts the contemporary politics through the mirror of society in his novels. With the help of his characters Mistry brings out stark and real contemporary politics in the front of the reader. He has brought out some real but one sided and limited version of politics of almost every level which was present in India. His novel has vivid portrayal of contemporary politics and political consciousness of the society. He weaves character, motifs real history and fiction into a rich tapestry. His novels candidly offer a bold view of life in which they are suffused with an objective analysis of various political aspects and problems. He provides deeply felt reflections to their relationships between individual and his surroundings and the complex problems arising out of them. The fiction of Mistry, like any other important work of art, has been created not in a state of vacuum, but is the work of an author who is actually conscious of his social milieu and responds to its various social and political aspects in an artistic manner.

Thus we can say that Mistry has successfully embedded the political crisis of his time in the literary endeavours depicts the fact that they seem one sided version of historical events. He depicts the contemporary politics by encountering its stark features. Here it would be in the fitness of things to say that his fiction is an account of some real which is one sided and limited. His fiction characterizes Bombay in particular and India in general in terms of political scenario.

REFERENCES

1. Nurjehan, Aziz. *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Criticism*. Toronto: TSTAR Publication. 1999. Print.
2. Rohinton, Mistry. *Family Matters*. Delhi: Penguin, Faber & Faber 2003. Print.
3. Kumar, Manoj. *Rohinton Mistry's Creative Response to India*. Meerut: Shalabh Publishing House. 2011. Print.

